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ABSTRACT

Child neglect typically involves a failure on the part of parents, guardians or other responsible parties to provide for the child's basic needs, such as food, shelter, medical care, education opportunities, or protection and supervision. Intended to help teachers recognize the symptoms of child neglect in their students, this article discusses the manifestation of child neglect in the classroom. The article focuses on neglect as a specific kind of child abuse, and discusses kinds of neglect and how teachers can provide an island of safety for neglected children. Issues of neglect are considered, including the lack of physical care, emotional maltreatment, the effect of neglect on school performance, and the social and behavioral indicators of neglect, such as aggressiveness, hypervigilance, and dissociation. Based on interviews, the experiences of four teachers with neglected children in their classrooms are also examined. (JPB)

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DEFINING THE UNKNOWN-

NEGLECT

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ABSTRACT

The emotional pain and the developmental cost of neglect are often ignored. As teachers, we are usually the first to encounter signs of neglect. This article will help teachers recognize and prevent neglect from occurring in their classrooms. Teachers who have experienced neglect in their classrooms are not alone. Four teachers who were interviewed in this article explain their stories. Neglect, at times, can be worse than abuse and it is necessary to take certain actions.

INTRODUCTION

Joey is a first grader who is constantly acting out and fighting with others. His behavior has deteriorated since September. He picks fights and is continuously trying to get the teachers attention. Joey's problems have become worse over the months. He was a good student who has always done his work and has gotten along well with his classmates. It has only been recently that he has stopped doing his homework, has become aggressive, and is always hungry. There are no signs of physical abuse, but something was different about his behavior. When speaking with Joey's parents, who are separated, his mother seemed fed up with his behavior. She did not know what else to do with him. His behavior at home was the same way. When his father became aware of this, he threatened to give Joey "a whipping". Every time Joey's parents were asked to come to school, his mother would only show up and become very upset. She did not know what to do. The father was never present for any meetings.

It has been reported by child protective services that over 1 million children were victims of substantiated or indicated child neglect in 1995. This is a sad case of society's

ills. As a teacher, we usually are the first to spot signs of neglect and it is important that we recognize and prevent it from occurring in our schools. For many of our students, school is the most stable and protective environment in their lives and we need to provide this environment for all children but especially, for those who experience neglect at home.

This article will focus on neglect, one aspect of child abuse, the specific kinds of neglect, and how teachers can provide this island of safety for neglected children. The following topics that will be discussed are the lack of physical care, emotional maltreatment, the effect of neglect on school performance, and the social and behavioral indicators of neglect.

Many neglected children may feel unworthy to interact with peers, may isolate themselves, and may encounter peer rejection (Lowenthal, 1996, p. 22). In return, there are feelings of anxiety, guilt, embarrassment, depression, and anger.

Neglect is hard to judge and it is not taken serious enough, especially since it has serious consequences. Perhaps neglect is taken less seriously because the effects are usually insidious and not obvious (Dubowitz, 1994, p. 1). It could be that a child's poor growth due to inadequate food may not be as dramatic as a broken bone and that the term "abuse" implicates a tone of urgency in such a way that "neglect" does not. But when we look at the statistics, almost half of the child fatalities are due to maltreatment each year as a result of neglect (Dubowitz, 1994, p. 1).

It is obvious that in Joey's case, he was acting out his pain in the classroom because he could not express it in words. He was experiencing neglect and was acting

out this pain in disruptive, annoying, and frustrating ways. He behaved aggressively by hurting others without seeming to care.

Joey was clearly neglected by both parents. His mother was rarely around because she needed to work hard to support the both of them and the father would only come around if he needed to threaten him due to his behavior. Because Joey was not provided with adequate supervision and care, he was exposed to dangerous and unhealthy environments. Aside from neglect, he was being emotionally abused as well.

Joey was showing signs of emotional abuse. He was becoming intensely angry and depressed especially when he was reprimanded. His schoolwork was suffering because no one took the time out to help him at home.

DEFINITION OF NEGLECT

Neglect typically involves a failure on the part of the parents, guardian, or other responsible party to provide for the child's basic needs, such as food, shelter, medical care, educational opportunities, or protection and supervision. Neglect is associated with abandonment and inadequate supervision (Cates, Markell, and Bettenhausen, 1995, p. 1). If a child lacks any of these necessities, an investigation should take place. If the family is in a crisis and lacks the resources to provide for the children, local social service agencies should be contacted to assist. If the parents have resources to care for a child properly but choose not to, they are neglecting that child.

TYPES OF NEGLECT

Lack of Physical Care

A child's need for a safe and nourishing environment begins even prior to conception and continues throughout pregnancy, raising the potential for neglect to occur prior to birth (Crouch and Milner, 1993, p. 3).

Physical indicators of neglect may be hard to judge because sometimes what you actually see is poverty, not personal neglect. However, a child's physical appearance is an indication of neglect. These may consist of begging, stealing food, constant fatigue and listlessness, unattended medical needs, delinquency, extended stays at school or early arrivals, and late departures (Schmitt, 1981, p. 304).

Emotional Maltreatment

Little Sam was always very quiet as a baby. He rarely cried as a baby and now, has hardly any facial expressions. Both parents worked very long hours so Sam was placed in a daycare for most of the day. As he grew older, he continued to be a very quiet child but something was not right about his behavior. He was antisocial with the other children and never spoke. When his parents were confronted with the problem, they said he was like this at home and they felt that he was just a shy boy.

What Sam was suffering from was emotional maltreatment. At home, his father who is a very free-spoken man emotionally abused Sam. Sam was severely rejected,

humiliated, and verbally terrorized by him. His father would severely criticize him and expressed no affection whatsoever.

Emotional maltreatment is the constant use of verbally abusive language to harshly criticize and denigrate a child. Generally a result of the child's inability to meet unrealistic demands made by the parents (Besharov, 1990, p. 19).

It is a good thing that the daycare noticed Sam's behavior because these types of children are usually ignored. They are so hostile and angry inside that they usually alienate themselves with anyone they come in contact with or they may be completely passive, withdrawn, and uncommunicative as in Sam's case. In any case, they represent extremes in the expected range of behavior, attitude, and affect. Emotionally maltreated children are not always physically abused, but physically abused children are almost always emotionally maltreated (Besharov, 1990, p. 20).

EFFECTS ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Neglect was associated with the poorest academic achievement among the different groups of maltreated students (Lowenthal, 1996, p. 23). Teachers found that these children were performing below grade level. Neglect appears to have a greater long-term impact on academic performance than do other forms of abuse. This may be because these children had to learn survival skills out of necessity because there was no care in their homes.

Besides obtaining lower scores, neglected children perform lower on tests of language, reading, and math skills. There are delays in intellectual and linguistics

abilities, which have been noted as early as infancy and appear to continue into adolescence (Crouch and Milner, 1993, pp. 4,5).

Youngsters with caring parents or caregivers learn to view themselves as worthy, lovable, and competent in school-related and other cognitive tasks. However, children of insensitive caregivers may see themselves as unworthy of love or caring and incompetent in academic performance (Lowenthal, 1996, p. 23). It appears that by preschool age, specific behaviors are associated with neglect. The children are more impulsive and disorganized and were less successful on preacademic tasks. They lacked the necessary social and work skills for age appropriate adjustments in their preschool or kindergarten classes (Lowenthal, 1996, p. 23). These children were eventually referred for special education or retention. Many children also show a greater dependency towards adults and a strong need for constant attention from the teacher. They rely on their teachers for support and encouragement.

Research suggests that a major reason for poor academic performance be due to a lack of positive stimulation at home.

INDICATORS OF NEGLECT APPARENT IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Social and Behavioral Indicators

It has been reported that neglected children remain isolated during opportunities for free play with other children. They exhibit both withdrawn and aggressive behavior

and will rarely interact with their peers. They rarely accept them as well. Socially they are lacking a sense of humor, positive affect, or joy.

Aggressiveness

Some children seem to be constantly picking fights with others. They are aggressive and rarely hesitate to hit when angry (Gootman, 1993, pp. 15,16). Many of these children who have been treated aggressively, will act aggressive in the classroom or outside of their homes. These children seem cold, hard, and unfeeling. They are this way because they are so often neglected and hurt that they finally close off their minds to any feelings.

Annoying Behaviors

Some children will do almost anything to annoy the teacher or their classmates. For example, they will bang on their desks, they will drop their pencils on purpose, or they constantly interrupt. This is done so that they can get this immediate or constant attention that they do not receive at home.

Hypervigilance

These children are the type that are fearful, suspicious, and mistrustful or always on the lookout for potential dangers (Gootman, 1993, p. 17). They are moody and often are afraid to express feelings or ideas.

Dissociation

Some children are in space all day. They are forgetful and frequently daydream. They actually remove themselves from the classroom or environment in which they are. Many do not process or retain information, although they make it look as if they are attentive. When carried to the extreme, dissociation can lead to multiple personalities (Gootman, 1993, p. 18).

When I was researching the topic of neglect, I realized it was important to find out what other teachers felt about neglect and how they dealt with certain situations throughout their teaching careers. It was necessary to find out if they knew the signs of neglect when they came across a neglected child, who was in need of protection.

I have interviewed four fellow teachers who all work in the New York Public School System. The average years of teaching range from 5 years to 15 years. They mostly work with first graders, and two teachers are out of the classroom. One is a music teacher, and the other is a Literacy Facilitator.

Four of the teachers had several cases of neglect in their classrooms before, so they were quite familiar with the subject. When asked to define neglect, they all felt that it was when a parent or guardian did not take care of their child's basic needs. This child seemed to be unkempt, distracted, very hungry, inattentive in class, dressed inappropriately, and came to school either late or early on a regular basis.

When asked if the child was aggressive or disruptive, the teachers explained that the child acted out constantly. Some, however, explained that the child was withdrawn, unfocused, and sleepy. They did not pay much attention and they lacked concentration.

A major concern of the teachers was the child's appearance. They seemed to notice that the child came to school with either dirty clothes that were the same everyday, unwashed hair, dirty fingernails, waxy ears, offensive odors, and inappropriate clothes for that season. One teacher even said that she noticed the smell of urine, permeating around the child whose clothes tended to be inside out all the time. All four of the teachers said that they found the child to often be sad and have low self-esteem because other children were constantly teasing them.

When asked if the parents showed any concerns for their child, the teachers reported that many parents said they were too busy and that they were unaware of their child's behavior. Some parents were more concerned about their hectic lives and seemed to put the blame on their child. One teacher said that she could never get the parents to come into school for a meeting. They just spoke on the phone and said they could not get out of work.

It seems that all four of the teachers, who were interviewed, took the right steps when they had to report an incident of neglect. All of them reported it to the guidance counselor immediately and felt that the sooner it was reported, the faster the child would get help. They also felt that there should always be a follow-up to see that the child's needs are being met and that no further abuse is occurring.

As a teacher, I believe it is extremely important to be able to spot signs of abuse and neglect and know what to do after reporting it. I have had many cases of neglect in

my classroom and each case was different. I realized that the key to working with abused children is to first understand the origins of their mis-behavior and then design strategies to help these origins.

After writing this article, I learned that by modeling certain behaviors to children, we allow them to have a better sense of self-control and self-worth. This way, they are less likely to lash out hurtfully to others. I realized that it was necessary to acknowledge their pain and to also accept their feelings. Children who cannot feel for themselves cannot feel for others (Gootman, 1993, p. 18). By allowing children to acknowledge their feelings, we are allowing them to increase their awareness of other's feelings as well.

I also learned that by providing opportunities for choice and decision-making, children are given the opportunity to explore. Since many children who are abused feel powerless at home, this environment will allow them to gain a sense of self-respect and empowerment.

If teachers are able to recognize the risks and temptations facing our children today, we can provide support and guidance before it is too late. Teachers will encounter cases of neglect throughout their teaching years and it is important to help these children gain more self-esteem and positive feelings of being appreciated, loved, and valued by others. Even though it is our job to report these cases, it should also be in our hearts to help. Just think, if it wasn't for someone who noticed, it might have continued forever.

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